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Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand: The Making of Banharn-buri

YOSHINORI NISHIZAKI

Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2011, xvii+254 p.

When Adhemar de Barros ran as candidate for the governor of São Paulo in the 1947, he anchored his campaign on the slogan "Rouba mas faz!" (roughly translated meant "He steals, but he gets things done!") De Barros went on to win the elections. He was a single termer and lost in the next round, but a decade later he reclaimed the post and became one of the most fascinating characters in Brazilian politics. Adhemar was a populist who won because of a solid electoral machine behind him (the Social Progressive Party dominated São Paulo politics in his time) and advocacy of social legislation and infrastructure development aimed at helping the poor. He was also perennially accused of corruption, although even his critics would qualify that in his days in office he did "get things done." The Thai politician Banharn Silpa-archa would have found a lot of things to talk about with Adhemar for the long-time boss of Suphanburi Province (slightly off the northwest side of Bangkok) would see in the Brazilian a kindred soul.

Why Suphanburians see Banharn differently from the way Bangkok and its "modern" elites and bevy of self-proclaimed democrats portray him is the subject of this excellent book by Yoshinori Nishizaki. Deploying a research methodology that combines social history, institutionalism and ethnography, Nishizaki proceeds to prove that, yes, Banharn is corrupt and the origins of his wealth are murky, but to his constituents he has singlehandedly brought modernity to their backwater communities. Yes, he colludes with dubious characters and keeps a firm control over state largesse for his benefit, yet his connections with powerful forces like the monarchy and with state bureaucrats also enabled him to bring development to his home province. And yes, he tends to amass power and sees no value in spreading "democracy" among his wards, but no matter, he has made "bad democracy" ("defective patrimonial democracy at the local level," as Nishizaki calls it) work in Suphanburi's favor.

This "false consciousness" can be traced back to a long history of neglect by "imperial" Bangkok. Nishizaki shows how Suphanburians have viewed the Thai state through time: an "unfeeling,"

"crooked" and "ineffectual" state which had "belittled" the province for so long ("Suphanburi had been dumped [*thort thing*] by the state in a deep jungle, while other provinces from the north to the south prospered [at Suphanburi's expense]," complained on respondent). Banharn appeared on the scene just in time, the local hero awash in wealth from his construction company and then taking on the challenge of improving local welfare.

His personal donations (hospital wards, school buildings, welfare charities) started the development process, bringing not only prestige to Banharn but also laying the foundations for a political career that eventually propelled him to national prominence. Once in parliament, Banharn used state funds and maintained cozy relationships with critical agencies like the Department of Public Works to bring more bacon back to Suphanburi, to the delight of its citizens. Two of Nishizaki's best chapters discuss the relationship between infrastructure and the way it built political capital for Banharn (Chapter 4), and how roads and schools then became the institutional foundations for a provincial "imagined community" revolving around the old man's charisma (Chapter 6).

Suphanburians became Banharn's avid defenders when he was attacked in the capital for corruption. And as Suphanburi's landscape improved because of the spread of a modern road system and the expansion of schools and hospitals, Suphanburians also began to shed off their insecurities, taking pride in how their province had moved ahead of the others (and thumbing their noses at places like Chiangmai and Chiangrai). They then showed their gratitude to Banharn by littering Suphanburi with signboards paid for by communities, businessmen (and women?) and "ordinary" people, thanking the boss and asking him to attend one celebratory ceremony after another (Chapter 6).

How did Banharn ensure that state money was well spent? Nishizaki takes issue with the now popular view of local strongmen (*nakleng*) as violence-driven spoilsmen who act as Janus-faced mediators between state and community. Banharn, he argues, is less a *Mafiosi* and more like the ubiquitous provincial Chinese shop-owner, a *longju* (in Teochew) who is simultaneously meticulous and fuzzy about how things are done. This explains why Banharn was always visiting the province, checking on projects, demanding updates, nitpicking on reports, and berating local bureaucrats when their updates appear unreliable or incomplete.

And with Suphanburi's "relatively simple" social structure, Banharn "can enforce and maintain his [Foucauldian] panopticon control over civil servants directly and effectively, even at the lowest village level" (pp. 124–125). And *pace* critics who see these as mere showcases, Nishizaki argues that the sheer number of visits Banharn made to Suphanburi and the rigorous schedule he followed suggest the work ethic of a *longju*. The boss indeed took his responsibilities very, very seriously.

But this is also where one encounters a loose end. Nishizaki talks about secretly joining a journalist friend to watch Banharn preside over a meeting of the top directors of the 11 provincial public hospitals. He "observed in person" how the boss "had each director report to him how all

the budget items they had requested were justified and to what extent the funds allocated in the previous year were used in accordance with the original plan" (p. 122).

Yet, we do not get a sense of the tempo and temper of such a meeting and how these might explain Banharn's *longju* ethics. This should have been the part in the book where Nishizaki describes, in greater ethnographic detail, the tone of the meeting, the rise and fall in voices (and tempers?), and the ways in which the directors showed deference to the boss. Instead, we have his friend's vapid description of how things turned out: "This is like an oral examination at a university, and it's a grueling exam. It's not easy. But if you are a civil servant here, you must pass the exam" (p. 123).

This brings us to one of the book's puzzles. Nishizaki's portrait of the boss suggests someone who can be quite approachable, your typical small-town friendly *politico* as it were. The question then is why Nishizaki—who valued interviews (he listed down and described the sex, occupation, place of residence, dates of interviews and additional information about the 105 people he interviewed for his dissertation)—did not go straight to Banharn at that directors' meeting when he appeared to be just a couple of handshakes away from the boss? Why did he hesitate to ask for a one-on-one interview with the object of his curiosity? Perhaps Nishizaki feared that once "revealed" to the boss, his contacts would shy away from him after getting a warning from a Banharn wary of outsiders probing into his locale? But then if Banharn's panopticon was that good, then would he not know what people were telling Nishizaki and hence encourage them to tell him more good stories? This is one pathway where an elaborate Geertzian-like speculation was possible, but Nishizaki chose to keep his distance and just work the enamored crowd.

This gap inevitably raises another related point. Nishizaki argues that when it comes to Banharn's patrimonialism, "political scientists might try to examine the extent to which their narratives are objectively true. Such an exercise would be pointless, however, [as] Suphanburians' narratives have overlapping elements of reality, imagination, misrepresentation, exaggeration and (unintentional) distortion mixed into them" (p. 178). Indeed, his respondents produced varied explanations when it came to Banharn's corruption (from "we do not know" to accusing his critics of envy, to treating corruption as simply a "Thai custom"). But they remained unswerving in their support for him. Popular defense of the local despot is not unique here, as Nishizaki points out in his overview of comparative cases in East and Southeast Asia. Janus-faced politicians in Asia—and in still distant frontiers like the southern United States (oddly excluded by Nishizaki)—are known to shower their local constituents with development projects and promise provincial modernization, while reverting to their sleazy backroom and patronage deals to enrich themselves, their families and cronies once they are back in the capital.

Banharn's constituents know this and as long as "development" is constantly pouring into Suphanburi, they do not care if he is corrupt. They are perfectly happy with their boss. This is a point that Nishizaki repeatedly states in varying degrees of emphasis throughout the book, and it

stands on solid empirical *and* comparative grounds. But he fails to ask this crucial question to his respondents: have your lives improved considerably since the roads, schools and hospitals were built or improved? The book oddly says nothing about incomes and inequalities, content to rely on the vagueness of terms like development or improvement. We have no idea of how poor Suphanburi was before Banharn started pouring in infrastructure funds; neither are there any data on whether incomes had gone up after the modern highways were in use. Had this question been asked, it is possible that Nishizaki would have received more qualified responses. The admiration for Banharn may come mixed with apprehensions about the family's fortunes while the applause for what the Boss brought from Bangkok could be tempered by worries of a growing class disparity as the rice economy continues to evolve with the spread of high-yielding varieties and their attendant costs.

There is, in fact, very little political economy in this book and this lacuna is where Nishizaki is vulnerable to those who still see Banharn as the quintessential corrupt local boss. There are hints all over, especially when it comes to ascertaining why a certain construction firm got the contract for a particular road (cousins and cronies), but the overall picture of Banharn's corrupt enterprise remains sketchy (how much is Banharn worth? We do not know and his biographer does not tell us). Nishizaki may dither and say this is not what he was interested in, but at the end of the day, when you factor in the issue of whether Suphanburians' lives had improved after the roads were built, he must confront this major issue head on.

These are quibbles that perhaps this smart young scholar may wish to explore in his next book. As for now, let us enjoy this wonderful work, and especially delight in its idiosyncratic take on the "voices from below," where instead of opposition or quiet resistance against those in power, we hear approbations of what the strongman has done for them.

Somewhere in the netherworld Adhemar de Barros is smiling.

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Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam

KIRSTEN W. ENDRES

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011, 244 p.

The resurgence of popular religion in Vietnam has attracted the attention of a large number of scholars, who have recently published works on the music (Norton 2009), hero worship (Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009), transnational spread (Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2011) and modernity (Taylor 2007) of the colorful rituals. Kirsten Endres' *Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets and*